THE BEGINNING OF PUBLIC WORKS

It was then that the Council of the Unemployed received its first requisition for workers. The new Municipal Committee had intended originally to use our organization only as a hiring office, but later it realized that it needed our co-operation in dealing with the unemployed and asked us to act as a co-operative construction contractor. We would have accepted if we had been sure of enough jobs for all our men. We anticipated, however, that public works would fall short of this goal and feared that, as a contractor, we would be unable to establish a system of rotation to distribute the available jobs among all the unemployed on our waiting list. We therefore suggested that the Municipal Committee itself should be the contractor while we would deliver the labor force and assume responsibility for firing, hiring, and maintaining discipline on the job. The agreement also provided for an eight-hour day and a flat wage for all—one ruble a day, plus ten kopeks for carfare.

These were fair conditions. Our men might have thought them unexpectedly favorable except for the particular character of the work. The jobs assigned to them were mainly in earth-moving projects. The most important single project was to build an earthen dam to protect the Neva harbor against floods. Building steel bridges also entailed a lot of earth moving. Furthermore, in order to put as many men to work as possible, we banned the use of labor-saving machinery and insisted that all earthwork be done with hand shovels, pickaxes, crowbars, and wheelbarrows. The work was hard on our men, most of whom were accustomed to less strenuous jobs at a lathe, and it became particularly so in the winter, when the ground began to freeze. But we succeeded in establishing an ideological halo around our public works: the eight-hour working day and self-government!

In view of its new responsibilities, the Council of the Unemployed tightened its organization. It established eight precinct councils consisting of delegates elected by the unemployed and employed workers. The St. Petersburg Council included all precinct councils, plus representatives from the public works. The executive board consisted of two representatives from each precinct and one from each public works project. The president, elected by direct ballots of the unemployed and employed workers, was charged with general control over the precinct councils and entitled to dissolve them and prescribe new elections if necessary. I was again elected unanimously to this position and became a slave to commitments for which I was unprepared.